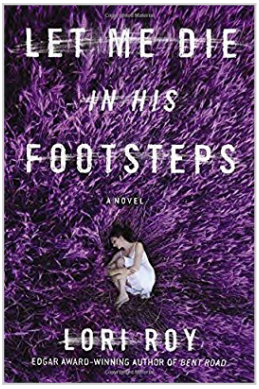

Let Me Die in His Footsteps: A Novel

By Lori Roy

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In the spellbinding and suspenseful *Let Me Die in His Footsteps*, Edgar Award–winner Lori Roy wrests from a Southern town the secrets of two families touched by an evil that has passed between generations.

On a dark Kentucky night in 1952 exactly halfway between her fifteenth and sixteenth birthdays, Annie Holleran crosses into forbidden territory. Everyone knows Hollerans don't go near Baines, not since Joseph Carl was buried two decades before, but, armed with a silver-handled flashlight, Annie runs through her family's lavender fields toward the well on the Baines' place. At the stroke of midnight, she gazes into the water in search of her future. Not finding what she had hoped for, she turns from the well and when the body she sees there in the moonlight is discovered come morning, Annie will have much to explain and a past to account for.

It was 1936, and there were seven Baine boys. That year, Annie's aunt, Juna Crowley, with her black eyes and her long blond hair, came of age. Before Juna, Joseph Carl had been the best of all the Baine brothers. But then he looked into Juna's eyes and they made him do things that cost innocent people their lives. Sheriff Irlene Fulkerson saw justice served—or did she?

As the lavender harvest approaches and she comes of age as Aunt Juna did in her own time, Annie's dread mounts. Juna will come home now, to finish what she started. If Annie is to save herself, her family, and this small Kentucky town, she must prepare for Juna's return, and the revelation of what really happened all those years ago

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for Let Me Die in His Footsteps

"Open *Let Me Die in His Footsteps* anywhere and Lori Roy's melodious voice will float off the page….This Depression-era story is a sad one, written in every shade of Gothic black. But its true colors emerge in the rich textures of the narrative, and in the music of that voice, as hypnotic as the scent coming off a field of lavender." --*New York Times Book Review*

"*Let Me Die in His Footsteps* is a hybrid of mystery, coming-of-age and Southern gothic literature…it's taut and evocative – things simmer and tickle and sizzle underfoot, and the book practically smells like a lavender field." --*LA Times*

"It teems with family feuds, forbidden love, second sight and wronged innocents, all held together by Roy's taut style and gift for suspense." –*Tampa Bay Times*

"With pithy characters and a winding plot leading readers to dark places they won't anticipate, this is a story of sisters, lovers, mothers and daughters, and what can happen when evil slips its way between those ties." --Associated Press

"A richly detailed, highly suspenseful Gothic novel filled with indelible imagery." –*Huffington Post*

"An atmospheric, vividly drawn tale that twists her trademark theme of family secrets with the crackling spark of the "know-how" for a suspenseful, ghost-story feel." --*Booklist* (starred review)

"This powerful story…should transfix readers right up to its stunning final twist." --*Publishers Weekly (starred review)*

"A Faulkner-ian tale of sex and violence from the Kentucky hills." --*Kirkus*

"The richness of [the] characters makes their decisions crackle. . . . Which, as any Harper Lee fan will tell you, is what makes these stories endure in our very protective hearts. . . . While intense and at times a little ruthless, Roy's novel has elements of both what we love about the southern gothic mixed with the other perennial American classic: the coming-of-age tale. This is a dark story of adolescence in all of its awkward, terrible, exhilarating glory. And that's what makes it sing."—*Bustle*

"Edgar Award winner Lori Roy…serves up a mystery with a thick, rich blend of Southern Gothic mainstays…This coming-of-age story dropped into a world of hardscrabble existence has an almost painful poignancy." –*Fort Worth Star Telegram*

"There are echoes of Flannery O'Connor here: poverty, violence, malevolence, and grace. Roy's writing is spell-like, using a simplicity of language, deft characterization, an understanding of the dark side of human nature, and relentless plotting in order to pull together every aspect of the conjuring necessary to create a masterpiece of Southern Noir" -- *Historical Novel Society*

"Reading Lori Roy is a sinuous, near-physical experience, her stories so rich and well-told they twine into

the reader in a manner both gentle and profoundly deep. I consider her writing a love-sonnet to American letters. Simply lovely." --John Hart, Edgar-Award winning and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The King of Lies* and *Iron House*

“Rich and evocative, Lori Roy's voice is a welcome addition to American fiction." --Dennis Lehane

"This is a beautifully observed story whose details of time, place, and character are stunning little jewels sure to dazzle the eye on every page. . . . Quite simply put, I loved this book." --William Kent Krueger, Edgar-Award winning author of *Windingo Island* and *Ordinary Grace*

“Young love, Southern folklore, family feuds, and crimes of passion . . . Roy describes life on a lavender farm in rural Kentucky in vivid detail, and the mystery of what happened years ago will keep readers engaged until the end.” *--Library Journal*

About the Author
LORI ROY is the autho of *Bent Road*, winner of the Edgar Award for Best First Novel, and *Until She Comes Home*, finalist for the Edgar Award for Best Novel. She lives in St. Petersburg, Florida, with her family.

1

1952—ANNIE

ANNIE HOLLERAN HEARS him before she sees him. Even over the drone of the cicadas, she knows it’s Ryce Fulkerson, and he’s pedaling this way. That’s his bike, all right, creaking and whining. He’ll have turned off the main road and will be standing straight up as he uses all his weight, bobbing side to side, to pump those pedals and force that bike up and over the hill. In a few moments, he’ll reach the top where the ground levels out, and that front tire of his will be wobbling and groaning and drawing a crooked line in the soft, dry dirt.

They’re singing in the trees again today, those cicadas. A week ago, they clawed their way out of the ground, seventeen years’ worth of them, and now their skins hang from the oaks, hardened husks with tiny claws and tiny, round heads. One critter called out to another and then another until their pulsing songs made Annie press both hands over her ears, tuck her head between her knees, and cry out for them to stop. Stop it now. All these many days, there’s been something in the air, a spark, a crackle, something that’s felt a terrible lot like trouble coming, and it’s been much like the weight of those cicadas, thousands upon thousands of them crying out to one another.

Annie has known all morning Ryce would be coming. It’s why she’s been sitting on this step and waiting on him for near an hour. She oftentimes knows a thing is coming before it has come. It’s part of the curse—or blessing, if Grandma is to be believed—of having the know-how.

They both have the know-how, Annie and Aunt Juna. That's what Grandma calls it. The know-how. It floats just above the lavender bushes, trickles from the moss hanging in the oaks, drifts like a fallen leaf down the Lone Fork River, just waiting for someone like Annie or Aunt Juna to scoop it or snatch it or pluck it from the air. The two of them share the know-how because Aunt Juna is Annie's real mother. Grandma has it too. She says there's no evil in the know-how, though some are frightened of a thing they know little about. It's my gift to you, Grandma is all the time saying, but that's not true. The know-how passes from mother to daughter. Everyone knows that. Annie also has Aunt Juna's black eyes. Not dark brown or almost black. But *black*, through and through. Folks believe that's where the evil lives. In the eyes. It's Annie's fear, has been all her life, that evil passes from mother to daughter too.

Most days the know-how is like a whisper or a sigh, but with the approach of Annie's half birthday—her day of ascension, they call it—the know-how has swelled, and this something in the air has made Annie startle for no reason, hold her breath when she thought she'd heard something she ought not have heard. All her years, fifteen and a half of them when she celebrates her day of ascension tomorrow, Annie Holleran has lived with the fear of turning out like her Aunt Juna. All her years, Annie has lived with the fear that Aunt Juna will one day come home.

Pushing herself off the bottom step and not bothering to smooth her skirt or straighten her blouse, Annie walks into the middle of the drive, kicking up dust with her bare feet. With every step, her middle caves and her shoulders slouch, Annie's favored posture since she sprouted last summer. That's what Mama called it . . . sprouting. And ever since, Mama has been telling Annie to stand straight and show some pride, as if being taller than most every other girl should be a prideful thing.

In addition to nagging about improper posture, Mama will be after Annie with soap and a rag by lunchtime, and she'll remind Annie no more going barefoot once a girl has ascended.

"Thought you'd be working today," Annie says as Ryce's bike slows to a stop. She crosses her arms and hugs herself, another way to shrink an inch or two.

Ryce kicks out his right leg and lets his bike tip until he's carrying his weight on that one foot. He's wearing dark trousers, one leg rolled up to his shin so it doesn't catch in his chain, double-knotted leather boots, and a white undershirt covered in the same dark smudges that mar his forearms, hands, and face.

"Lunch break," Ryce says. He's holding on to his handlebar with one hand. In the other, he holds a crumpled white kerchief. "All the fellows get one."

This is the summer Ryce will buy himself a truck. He said the same last summer, but his daddy put all the money Ryce earned setting tobacco and picking worms in the bank and said college was but a few years away and it damn sure didn't pay for itself.

"You come here expecting I'd feed you?" As has happened so often in the past days and weeks, the nasty words pop out before Annie can stop them. She crosses her arms. In addition to shaving another inch off her frame, this is also a fine way of hiding her chest so Ryce won't notice it's not one bit bigger than the last time he saw her. No matter what he says, Annie catches Ryce sometimes staring.

"Didn't come expecting no food," Ryce says, studying that crumpled kerchief like it's something important. "Come to see if you was going tonight."

"Might. Might not."

"What does that mean? 'Might. Might not.'"

“Might not want to.”

“You ought want to go,” Ryce says.

The sun has lightened his hair a shade or two, and now it’s the exact same color as his pale-brown eyes. Sometimes, Annie catches herself staring too.

“Says who?” Annie asks.

“Every girl, that’s who,” Ryce says, tugging on the edges of that kerchief. He’s got something wrapped up inside, and because of the way he’s using only his fingertips, it must be some kind of treasure to him.

When, several days ago, Annie first noticed the spark in the air, Grandma had smoothed the tangles in Annie’s ordinary yellow hair, given her a squirt of lavender-scented lotion to rub into her hands and elbows, and said not to worry. That spark was not a sign of trouble-to-come. No, indeed. That spark signaled the arrival of the lavender.

Annie is almost of age, midway between fifteen and sixteen, and so is finally coming into her own. She’s ascending into womanhood, though she prefers to think she’s ascending into adulthood. “Womanhood” makes her think of the wide-bottomed women who sit in church, tissues always in hand to wipe clean the noses of whatever children crawl across their laps. “Adulthood” sounds not so confining as “womanhood.”

All kinds of yearning come with a girl’s ascension—so says Grandma—beautiful, glorious yearning that will twist up a girl’s insides, wring them this way and that. Seeing as she has the know-how, Annie will feel things now she’s never before felt. She’ll feel things the ordinary girls will not. The arrival of the lavender is only one of them. Acres of it grow around Grandma’s house, acres and acres, and the sweet smell has been gathering since last year’s crop was cut. There is coming, Grandma said, a single moment when those flowers, rows and rows, mounds and mounds, will explode into full bloom. Yearning, Grandma had said. You’ll soon know much about yearning.

Ryce is right about one thing: All the girls in Hayden County look forward to midnight of the day halfway between their fifteenth and sixteenth birthdays. They buy special nightgowns and new cotton robes. They stay up late to curl their hair and dab on a coat of pink lipstick, and as midnight approaches, these girls of Hayden County sneak out of their houses, travel to the nearest well, usually the well at the Fulkersons’ place, and peek down into it in hopes of seeing the reflection of their intended. They huddle around the well, the girl who will that very night ascend and her best friends or closest relations, while their mamas and daddies stand at a distance, smoking a cigar or sipping whiskey from a coffee cup. The mamas will call out, because it’s the mamas who worry most about who their girls will marry, “Who you see down there?” The girls will giggle, squint into the darkness, wave their flashlights in one another’s eyes, and call out the name of a favorite boy.

“Could ride up here after supper, if you want,” Ryce says. “After everyone’s in bed. Your bike working? We could ride down together.”

“Why would I want that, Ryce Fulkerson?”

Ryce’s daddy is the sheriff, and before that, his granddaddy was sheriff, and hand to God, his grandma too, which makes Ryce think he’ll be sheriff one day. It makes Ryce think he’s more of a man than he really is.

“Just offering,” he says. “Thought you might not want to make the trip alone.”

For the past ten years, most every girl has made her way to the Fulkersons' on her day of ascension. Mrs. Fulkerson makes a big show of keeping up the well at their place. In the spring, she plants marigolds around it, and in the winter, she makes Ryce shovel a path through the snow. Sheriff Fulkerson has even been known to pace nearby as a girl looks into the well, one hand resting on the handgun hanging at his waist because a person never knows what might happen when the spirits are being conjured. Even though it's dark, he'll wear his hat and march back and forth because nothing is more important than the virtue of the young women of Hayden County. Then he'll share a sip of whiskey with the dads and uncles and whoever else may have come to bear witness. Grandma says they never had such pageantry in her day and doesn't much appreciate the sheriff making light of tradition. Daddy says there isn't a thing wrong with a bit of pageantry or a good shot of whiskey.

"Not such a long trip if I go to the Baines' place," Annie says, nodding up toward the tobacco barn at the top of the rise behind her house. "There's a perfectly fine well right up there. Still got water in it, so I hear."

Everyone knows there's only one thing beyond the Hollerans' place, and that's the Baines' place. Everyone also knows Hollerans don't go near Baines. Aunt Juna was the start of all the hatred between the families, and even though she's been gone a good many years, the hatred has stayed put.

Juna Crowley is a legend. She's the one the girls sing about as their jump ropes slap hot concrete. Over and over the girls of Hayden County chant . . . Eyes like coal, she'll lead you astray . . . How many Baines will die this day? And the ropes swing around and around until their fibers turn frayed and prickly to the touch. Last summer, Dorothy Howard visited her grandma in Topeka, Kansas, and she said even those girls all the way up there were singing about Juna Crowley. One Baine, two Baines, one hundred and four Baines, those Topeka girls chanted. And if they're chanting in Topeka, they must be chanting all over the country.

Course, there were, are, only seven Baine brothers. No telling how many are still alive. Aunt Juna killed only one of them. Some twenty years ago, she saw to it Joseph Carl hanged by his neck until dead, and all these many years later, Browerton is still the town known for—known *only* for—being the town to last hang a man in plain sight for all to see.

Just last month, Arleen Kellerman caught three of her grandsons, who were visiting from Atlanta, Georgia, as they were about to kick the box out from under the neighbor boy. The rope was strung up over the pole that holds one end of her clothesline, the other end anchored to the side of her house. Every one of those boys got whipped. The one dressed up as Aunt Juna got the worst of it.

"Your daddy ain't going to let you go to the Baines' place," Ryce says, smiling in a way that lets Annie know she's a damn fool for saying such a thing. "Your mama ain't going to allow that either."

"What makes you think I care what my daddy says? Or my mama?"

"Don't think you should go to the Baines' place, that's all."

Still holding on to that kerchief, Ryce rolls his bike backward a few feet until he can see around the side of the house. He'll be wondering if a person can see the Baine place from here, but he won't be able to. He won't see it unless he runs up the hill behind the house and past Grandpa's tobacco barn. From there, he would see the rock fence that separates the two places, and he'd also see the well. And he might see old Cora Baine, the only Baine left, sitting in her rocker, a shotgun cradled in her lap.

It's only been a week since school let out and Annie last saw Ryce, but already he looks different, bigger, taller, thicker somehow. The neck of his undershirt is stretched from him having used it as a kerchief all morning. He'll have been tugging it up over his mouth, even chewing on it until it droops and frays. It's a

nasty habit, and his mama will get on him for it when he goes home for supper. And while the neck of that undershirt sags, the rest of it is all the sudden too small. It pulls across his chest and looks to be cutting him under the arms. His jawline has squared off some since school ended, and his nose has sprawled, no longer has the ball on the end that the women of town were all the time tweaking. Or maybe it's his overgrown hair. Hanging down past his ears, it slims him out in the face, and his skin is darker for having been out in the sun all day every day for a week. Damn it all, Annie looks just the same.

The spark that has nagged at Annie all these days has been like the ache in her legs that Mama calls growing pains or the stings that speckle Annie's calves when she gets into a patch of nettles. It's made her irritable, disagreeable, most especially with Ryce Fulkerson. When Annie told Grandma that her yearning felt nothing like a yearning should feel and that she didn't much like it, Grandma smiled, even laughed. She laughed harder still when Annie said she most certainly did not yearn for Ryce Fulkerson because he was a gosh-darn fool, when what she really wanted to say was that he was a Goddamn fool, but Annie knew better than to curse in front of Grandma. This made Grandma throw her head back and laugh right out loud.

Annie would have stomped away from anyone else who laughed that way, but not Grandma. Grandma's laugh made Annie want to cry because the yearning and the coming of the lavender and the feeling that something was lurking and not wanting to turn evil like Aunt Juna had stuffed her full and there was no room left. Grandma knew this and stopped her laughing, stroked one hand over Annie's cheek, and said this is exactly how a yearning should feel.

"I suppose I'll be going where I please and if I please," Annie says, and this time she feels the nastiness coming but can't stop herself from spitting it out. "One thing's for certain. I damn sure won't be seeing you down in that well."

"Course you won't," Ryce says. "Lizzy Morris already seen me. Don't suppose a man can be a husband to two women. Don't suppose he'd want to."

At the mention of Lizzy Morris, Annie turns on one bare heel and walks toward the kitchen. Lizzy Morris is one of those girls whose hair is always brushed, pulled back, and tied off with a bow, a Goddamn bow. Isn't that Lizzy Morris a lovely girl, Mama is all the time saying when they happen upon Lizzy at the café or in church or at the market.

"I figure that's a good thing then," Annie turns and says. "Hate to think you'd grow old alone." Then she marches on toward the house.

"Hey," Ryce calls out. "Hold up. I brought this for you."

Annie takes a few steps back toward Ryce. He smells of wet dirt and soggy leaves. Been pulling tobacco from the beds, most likely.

"Thought it might be helpful." He smiles and nods, urging her to come closer. When she's within arm's reach, he gives the crumpled kerchief a shake and something drops in Annie's palm.

"What on earth is this, Ryce Fulkerson?"

But Annie knows what it is. She knows exactly what it is. She already has the same hidden up in her top drawer just behind her Sunday stockings. It's the white, shriveled body of a dead frog.

"Not that I think you'll need it," Ryce says. "But just in case."

Annie closes her hand around the chalky body and swivels on that same bare heel. She must have told Ryce about the dead frog; otherwise he'd have never known. Men, boys, don't have the know-how. He means for her to grind it into a fine white powder and sprinkle it on the head of whatever boy she sees down in that well tonight. The powder of a dead frog will make the boy love her even if he isn't inclined toward Annie, which is likely because as hard as Annie tries to say her pleases and thank-yous like Mama is all the time insisting on, and as hard as Annie tries to brush her hair and wear clean clothes and smile the way her sister, Caroline, does, and as much as she tries not to look a person straight on with her black eyes because they have a way of frightening folks, most people are still not inclined toward her. This dead frog will make her intended love her despite her being doomed to turn out just like Aunt Juna.

Squeezing her fist as tightly as she can, Annie crushes the small body and lets the bits and pieces drop at her feet.

"I damn sure won't be coming to your place tonight, Ryce Fulkerson," she says, then walks up the stairs, across the porch, and inside without looking back.

2

AFTER THE GIRLS of Hayden County look down into the Fulkersons' well and walk away claiming to have seen the boy they are of a mind to marry, they begin to comb their hair differently, wear an apron when helping their mamas put out supper, fold their laundry without being asked. And they begin to talk about a first kiss.

Some of the girls, in the weeks after having their fates decided, are comforted to know they'll not be spinsters like that one great-aunt on their daddy's side or the cousin they see only at Christmas. Those girls, who fool even themselves into believing they saw a face down in that well, will save their first kiss for the boy they're destined to marry.

Other girls, in the weeks after looking in the well, start tugging with one hooked finger as if a noose is wrapped around their necks. They want a first kiss from some other boy. And then another kiss from another boy. They want to stall their future because once they say I do, they know there will be no others.

No matter which path a girl takes, all conversations turn to the first kiss once that half birthday has passed, and the girls who don't manage a first kiss shortly after staring into that hole are questioned daily. If she's a pretty girl, the boys loiter nearby, hoping to be the face she saw. They roll their shoulders back, lead with their chests, and open doors for her. If the girl is a homely sort, the boys pay her no mind and get on with their tiresome ways. In the very worst case, as with Emily Anne Tylerson, the boys shove one another into her path in hopes of dooming another fellow to the first kiss.

Annie may not be destined for the treatment that drove Emily Anne to tears, or perhaps she is, but she is certainly bound to be a girl who will draw indifference when she returns to school in the fall. While every boy in the county was tripping over his boots to be Lizzy Morris's first kiss, not a one of them will care to be Annie's, and that is something she will not risk. Not the looks of pity, the daily questions, the whispers and giggles behind cupped hands, or the dust in her face when the boys run from her path.

• • •

AT EXACTLY 11:15, Annie slides her legs over the edge of the mattress, scoots until her feet touch the floor, and holds her breath, because maybe that will stop the springs from creaking. Twice already, Mama

has opened the door, letting in just enough light to see that Annie was flesh and bone and not just a pile of pillows stuffed under her blankets. Each time, Annie drew in deep, full breaths so Mama would believe she was asleep.

For the past month, Mama has been talking about the foolishness of looking into wells. Annie agreed straightaway, and that was a mistake. Mama is always suspicious of Annie being agreeable. Next Mama started offering to drive Annie down to the Fulkersons' place if she was going to insist on partaking in the tradition. When Annie refused, again saying she thought it was all foolishness, Mama reminded Annie there is a perfectly good well right here on Grandma's farm. No need even to leave home. But it isn't a perfectly good well. It dried up years ago, long before Annie, Caroline, Mama, and Daddy moved in with Grandma, and the week they unpacked, Daddy covered it over with plywood and stones. No matter how perfectly good that well might have once been, it doesn't seem likely a person could see her intended's reflection in a boarded-over, dried-up well.

But Annie didn't say any of those things. Instead she told Mama she had no need for looking into Grandma's well or Ryce Fulkerson's well or any other well. She wanted Mama, and Daddy too, to believe so they wouldn't insist on tagging along and asking her which boy she saw or was he handsome and strong. Mostly she didn't want them coming along because maybe there isn't a future husband for Annie. Maybe, no matter how hard Annie tries to do as Mama says or make herself out to be just like Caroline, Annie is doomed to an evil nature, and maybe there is no intended for a girl with such a future. But Mama has checked on Annie twice, so it's clear she had not been convincing.

While Mama would have no part of Annie crossing onto Baine property and would certainly forbid it if she knew Annie was considering such a thing, the know-how is what frightens Mama most. Looking down into a well and seeing one's intended might be foolishness for the other girls, but it's something else for people like Annie and Aunt Juna. Annie feels things that aren't hers to feel. Aunt Juna was the same. Surely, she still is. Everything Annie does smells like, sounds like, looks like, tastes like, something she's done before, and she has a way of knowing how things will end before their end has come. You *have* done that before, Mama will sometimes say, or we all knew that dog was going to die or that tree was bound to fall with the next rain. Grandma says this knowing settles in at birth, ripens for fifteen and a half years, and on the day a girl ascends, the know-how is fully grown.

"Thought you might decide not to go."

The springs in Caroline's bed and her brass headboard creak as she swings her legs over the edge of the mattress and slides her feet into the cloth slippers that await her at the side of the bed.

"Don't you switch on that light," Annie says as she opens her nightstand's top drawer. "Hush and go back to sleep."

"I'll do no such thing," Caroline says, flipping on the light anyway. "I want to come too. Please, Annie. Let me come too."

Annie reaches one hand into the drawer. Feeling nothing, she pats the bottom and squeezes her hand inside until her fingers brush against the back panel.

"Looking for this?" Caroline says.

The light Annie had thought was coming from the bedside lamp is instead coming from a long-handled silver flashlight. It's the same flashlight Annie took from Daddy's shed earlier in the day.

“Give it,” Annie says.

“Be happy to.” Caroline waves the stream of light across Annie’s face. Even straight out of bed, Caroline’s long, dark hair is smooth as if freshly brushed. All that moving about stirs up the sweet smell that always clings to Caroline—roses, freshly squeezed lemons, and lavender. “You can have this light right now,” she says, “if you take me with you to the Fulkersons’.”

“I can’t do that,” Annie says, looking straight down that funnel of light. She stands, slowly unfolding her legs. The yellow stream follows her.

Once she reaches her full height, a good five inches taller than Caroline, Annie jams her hands in the pockets of her sweater and pulls them out one at a time. In her right hand, she holds one of Grandma’s white utility candles, its wick brand-new, waxy, and white. In her left, she holds three matchsticks she also took from the shed. This is what Mama must mean when she tells Annie to have some pride in her height. Being taller in this particular instance is pleasing.

“Don’t need that flashlight,” Annie says. “These’ll work just fine.”

She lets Caroline get a good look at the candle and matches before shoving them back into her pockets.

“Besides,” Annie says, “I ain’t going to the Fulkersons’ place. Going to the Baines’.”

Annie hadn’t been certain until that moment. She had thought she might try to push aside those rocks and the board Daddy stacked on top of Grandpa’s well. Annie had assumed a girl couldn’t see her intended in a dried-up well, but she does have the know-how after all, and so maybe she could see her intended where others likely could not. She would normally ask Grandma such a question, but not this time. Annie had also stowed her bike out near the road so she could ride down to Ryce Fulkerson’s well if need be. But now Caroline wants to come along, and Caroline is a sister who has a way of always getting the better of things.

“You are not going to the Baines’,” Caroline says, lowering herself onto her bed but not before smoothing under her nightgown as if taking a seat on a church pew. “Mama and Daddy’ll have our hides for going up there.”

“Then don’t come,” Annie says. “No one’ll have your hide for staying right here asleep in your own bed.”

A whole brood of Baines once lived up there. Seven Baine brothers, each one larger than the next, and each one, except Joseph Carl, chased away by his own mama. Keeping an ever-watchful eye out for the Baines has been a way of life for the Hollerans, a habit long in the making, one that started before Annie was born. If it rattles, Daddy taught both of them by the time they could walk, choose a different path. If it looks like a Baine, do the same. The last Baine brother left Hayden County when Annie was eight or nine, but still Daddy tells them . . . if it looks like a Baine, do the same, which has always left Annie feeling like someday, one of those Baines will come back.

Clutching the flashlight to her chest, Caroline turns the cone of light on herself. It catches her under her chin, and the shadows make her eyes sink into her head and her cheekbones rise high and grow more slender.

“What if Mama comes to check?” Caroline says. And just like at church, she crosses her ankles but not her legs. “You’ll get a whipping. Me too, for letting you go. What am I supposed to tell her?”

“You’ll tell her nothing,” Annie says, “because you’ll be asleep. I’ll be there and back before you know it.”

Caroline stands and lifts one bare foot, threatening to stomp it. “I’ll wake the house if you don’t take me.”

Caroline is trying her best to be cantankerous. Her fine manners and tender nature never struck Annie as a curse, but perhaps they are. Annie finally lets herself blink, the light glittering in her lashes, and wonders if all people as beautiful and polished as Caroline struggle to plant their flags. Caroline wants to stomp that foot of hers, but she won't. Grandma is always saying that a person has to know how to plant her flag, and planting flags takes gumption. Grandma also says gumption is no kin to beauty. She says this so Annie will know a person can have gumption without having a pleasing face. She says this because Annie is not the beautiful one.

Caroline has always been the better of the two sisters. "Don't let bygones get the best of you," folks will sometimes say to Annie when spotting her and Caroline in town. And then they turn their attentions to Caroline, tug on the end of one of her braids or wrap an arm around her shoulders. "No reason you can't be just like this one." Folks have been saying it, or some variation, for as long as Annie can remember.

"Your time hasn't come," Annie says, staring straight into the light Caroline has pointed back in her direction and willing herself not to squint or blink. "You're not old enough."

Caroline drops her hands so the light pools at her feet. She is wearing a nightgown handed down from Annie. When Annie was still wearing it, Mama would say it had seen its last day. The cotton had yellowed. The lace had drooped and frayed. Now that Caroline is wearing it, Mama doesn't say those things anymore. What had looked threadbare and worn on Annie looks elegant on Caroline.

"Please, Annie."

A year from now, it'll be Caroline's time to look into the well, but she knows and Annie knows Mama won't want Caroline to go, same as she didn't want Annie to go. The difference between the two is that Caroline always does as Mama says. Caroline going with Annie, even if it is a year too early, might be Caroline's only chance.

"I'm going to look in that well, Caroline Holleran," Annie says. And because Caroline is the sister who always gets the better of things and because Annie can't bear to have a witness to who she might or might not see in that well, she says, "And unless you want to come with me to the Baines' place, you ain't coming along."

• • •

AT THE BOTTOM of the staircase leading to the living room, Annie stops. She can't see him, Abraham Pace, but she darn sure can hear him. She can smell him too. More and more, Mama shoos Abraham away at the end of an evening. Even after he and Daddy have sipped a good bit of whiskey and smoked a good many cigars, Mama tells him it's not right he keeps sleeping on their sofa. He'll be a married man soon enough, and a woman set on marrying a man doesn't want him sleeping anywhere but in his own bed. Every time Mama tells him, Abraham complains that the gal of his, Abigail Watson, makes her cornbread white and who the hell ever heard of white cornbread. Abigail and her grandparents came to live here from over near Lexington when she was a child. They must like their cornbread white over there, but Abraham likes his yellow with an extra dose of sugar. After a good bit of this complaining, Abraham will finally promise to go home to his own bed next time around.

And yet, that's definitely Abraham Pace snoring. His stocking feet will be hanging over one end of the sofa, and his head will be wedged at a disagreeable angle on the other end. He's a large man, tall and broad, likely the tallest and broadest in all of Hayden County, so he doesn't fit so well.

For the past month, since Mama first started talking about Annie turning of age, Abraham has been telling

Annie it was his face her Aunt Juna saw down in the well. Clear as day, she saw me, he has told Annie nearly every day for a month. Said she knew it was me and that I was the one she'd marry. Said that even though your granddaddy didn't think much of me. And then Abraham would laugh and say what would he think of me now, because, besides being larger than most any man in the county, Abraham owns more land than most any man.

Taking the path she's practiced all day long, Annie crosses through the living room and kitchen. Opening the door slowly, because it does tend to creak, she looks toward the tree where Abraham sometimes ties up that dog of his. Tilly is her name, but tonight, Abraham has left her at home. Once outside, Annie rounds the side of the house and stops there, not knowing why she's stopped but feeling like she's waiting on something or someone. She's waiting on Daddy. He's talked a good bit about there being no one left up at that Baine place to give Annie any trouble, but still he'll follow her.

Daddy knows Annie will be going to the well tonight even though she made yet another speech at the supper table, after a month of like-minded speeches, about half birthdays and ascensions and intended husbands being foolishness. Daddy didn't believe her, and neither did Mama, but Daddy will have made Mama stay in bed and will have told her to let Annie do the thing every other girl gets to do. But Daddy will follow. He won't let Annie know he's there, watching over her, because a man who has gone from tobacco farming to lavender farming knows about things like pride and ego.

She'll run, knees high and arms pumping, until she reaches the tobacco barn. That's her plan. From there, she'll be able to see the Baines' house. She'll see that it's dark, the door closed, the shutters drawn. She'll see that Mrs. Baine isn't sitting on her front porch, rocking in her old rocking chair, a shotgun resting in her lap or propped up against the house within grabbing distance. Folks say that's what she does, day in and day out, in case one of her boys tries to come back home. And when Annie is sure Mrs. Baine isn't there waiting with a shotgun, she'll run on past the barn, climb the dry-stack rock fence separating the Baines from the Hollerans, hoping it doesn't crumble beneath her, and there, she'll find the well.

Rows of lavender follow the gentle curve of the hillside behind Grandma's house. Daddy may not be happy about growing lavender, but a job worth doing is a job worth doing well. And so the rows are perfectly spaced, and even now that the bushes have sprouted into large mounds and the stalks are tipped with bluish-gray buds, there is still room enough for a person to walk between each row. In a few weeks' time, maybe a month since this spring was cooler than most, the tiny buds will bloom and a rich purple will spread across the hills.

Earlier in the day, Annie had counted out the rows and picked the one that would lead her up the hill and drop her at the barn. She counts now, third row from the corner of the house, and begins to run. Here, on this side of the hill, the wind has a way of calming after dusk, and without a stiff breeze to stir it up, the smell of lavender has a way of lying down for the night. But as Annie runs through the bushes, she stirs up a breeze of her own. Her thin cotton nightgown flutters behind and brushes against the stalks. The smell of lavender lifts in her wake. The sweet scent chases her up the hill, making her run faster, breathe harder. She runs until she breaks free of the lavender row, and continues on though her lungs burn and her sides ache until she reaches Grandpa's barn.

Living here on this farm all her married years and letting Grandpa grow tobacco was Grandma's greatest failing. The way those tobacco plants sprung up tall and proud and then withered and were finally hacked off at the base and hung upside down to dry was a sign bigger than any other that had ever blessed Grandma, and she had ignored it, overlooked it, or had been plain afraid of it. Grandpa was damned to wilt and wither and end up no more than a husk of the man he once was. He was damned to suck on that tobacco for fifty of his sixty years, to chop it and dry it and haul it and sell it. He was damned to die, and when finally he did,

shriveled up and beginning to rot before he was laid in the ground, Grandma sold the land, sold nearly every acre that had ever grown a stalk of tobacco.

By the time Daddy, Mama, Annie, and Caroline moved in, Grandma had staked out the lavender beds. They had to move in, had no choice. When Grandma sold the land, she sold Daddy's livelihood. That's what Mama said to Grandma the day the bags were unpacked. How do you sell a man's birthright and expect him to survive? Grandma said she had plenty of money and no one would ever need for a thing. And isn't lavender a nicer crop to tend? People who grow lavender don't wilt and wither.

The path beyond the barn is black. Annie pulls the candle and a single matchstick from her pocket. She wraps the match up in her fist, hooks her thumbnail over the red tip, turns her face away, and plucks. The flame pops up, singeing the tip of her thumb. She touches the fire to the waxy wick, shakes out the match, and sticks her thumb in her mouth. She sucks on the sore patch and then cups the pocket watch that hangs from a chain around her neck. Its smooth silver case is warm from lying against her skin. She draws the candle close to the watch's face but still has to squint. Fifteen minutes until midnight.

Annie breathes in through her nose and exhales through her mouth, trying to slow the rise and fall of her chest. Even though it hasn't been used for drying tobacco in years, most days the barn still smells like the heavy leaves Daddy and Grandpa once strung up from its rafters, and like the tips of Daddy's fingers before the land was sold, and the chambray work shirts he wore in those days, and his tan trousers even after they'd been washed and wrung and hung on the line. He was happier then, when he spent all his time with tobacco.

During the day, a person has a good view of the Baine place from the barn. But now, under a black sky, there is nothing but darkness beyond the faint light of the candle. When Annie looks back down the hill, her own house is dark too, except for the dim yellow glow coming from the kitchen. Grandma leaves on the light over the stove in case someone needs a sip of water during the night. Mrs. Baine must not have a light like that, or if she does, she has no reason to keep it burning all night long. Annie holds the candle at arm's length and shields the flame with her free hand. She's never actually been to the well, has only seen it from the Hollerans' side of the waist-high fence made of limestone, one flat rock stacked on top of another.

Remembering Daddy, Annie looks back toward the house below with the one dimly lit window. She's too old to be wishing her daddy would come for her and take care of her, but that's exactly what she's wishing. She was sure before that Daddy was out here watching over her, probably him and Abraham Pace together, but if they were somewhere nearby, they'd have come for her by now. They'd have seen her standing outside the barn, squinting to see some landmark that would direct her a few feet to the right, a few feet to the left. It must be the whiskey. Too much of it and a bomb couldn't wake Daddy. That's what Mama says over coffee the mornings after Daddy and Abraham Pace have a go at their whiskey.

And then Annie thinks of Ryce Fulkerson and holds her breath so she can hear. She's listening for footsteps because maybe she heard something. Maybe that was a twig snapping or a clump of dirt getting kicked aside. Maybe Ryce is here even though she crushed that dead frog of his. It was a spiteful thing to do. Even as she did it, even as she crushed that chalky white body, she knew it was such, and as sorry as she was, she couldn't stop herself. Mean-spirited and spiteful and now she's alone because of it. She stretches the candle overhead, leans around the barn, and wishes she hadn't been so nasty.

"Ryce," she whispers, but only once because the sound of her own voice gives her a shiver. She reaches her arm out into the darkness, tips the candle, and can't help crying out when a stream of hot wax runs down the back of her hand. She drops the candle. The flame goes out.

3

MANY TIMES OVER the years, Caroline and Annie have squatted at the base of this very fence, daring each other to sneak a look at the Baine place. When finally one of them would find the courage to reach her fingers over the top of the flat rocks, unfold her knees, and lift just high enough to see over—usually this was Annie—she would straightaway drop back down, clutch her knees to her chest, and swear, double swear, to have seen Mrs. Baine. It's just like they say. She's rocking back and forth, her skirt dragging on the ground, a shotgun cradled in her lap. Annie does that now. She squats behind the fence, her dark candle in hand, and rests against the rocks that have sharp edges even after all these years.

Tapping a finger to the wick and feeling that it's cool to the touch, Annie slips the candle in her pocket, and as she did when she was seven, eight, ten, and twelve years old, she slides her hands up the fence, her fingers slipping in and out of the cracks between the cool, flat rocks as they crawl toward the top. Once there, she grips the edge and hoists herself, but only until her eyes clear the fence. She can see it . . . the Baines' well. It's no more than a shadow, a faint outline. Slaves dug it, that's what Grandma says. And they built the fence too, taught by the Irish. The Irish build the best fences, and so it's still standing all these years later.

She feels the light wrap around her as much as she sees it. Those were footsteps she heard, though they were traveling much slower than her own. Caroline would have taken her time, probably walked, and been careful not to snap any of the slender stalks.

"Thought you might need this."

Annie turns, and the light catches her in the eyes. She blinks, holds up a hand to shield herself.

"Damn it all," Annie says, dropping her hand as Caroline lowers the beam of light to the ground.

Hurrying back to the barn's open doorway, Annie motions for Caroline to follow. Annie's being tall is back to being something she wishes she could brush off. Being tall makes a person all too easy to spot.

"I told you not to come," Annie says. "And turn that damn fool thing off."

Caroline uses the flashlight to brighten her path and follows Annie. "Don't tell Mama," she whispers as she lets the light settle on a spot near her feet.

Stacked in a small perfect pile at the barn's entrance are a half dozen twisted cigarettes. Each one has been nearly snapped in two where the filter meets the tobacco except for the one with a tip that still glows.

Annie stoops to the pile and tosses dirt over the one smoldering butt. "Don't tell Grandma," she says.

Mama hates it when Daddy smokes, though he normally smokes cigars and usually only when he's drinking whiskey with Abraham Pace. But no one hates smoking like Grandma hates smoking. Annie stands, stomps on the cigarettes to be sure they've been snuffed, and glances around for some other sign of Daddy. They must be his, or Abraham's. They must be. She leans into the barn, waves for Caroline to point the flashlight inside. Bunches of lavender, cut early to be distilled, hang upside down. A person would have to duck to walk into the barn because of the low-hanging bundles, and even the smallest ruffle would knock loose the tiny buds. Annie leans and squints, looks hard at the stream of yellow light shining into the barn, looks for loose petals fluttering to the ground. Nothing. No one.

"It's almost time," Caroline says. She walks from the barn, leaving Annie alone in the dark, and makes her way to the fence. Once there, she lays the flashlight on top of the flat stones. The yellow glow travels down

the long rock fence and eventually fades into darkness. “You want to go first? Or should I?”

Caroline skipped the better part of childhood, never cared about sneaking off to go swimming when she was supposed to be hanging out the laundry. She never begged for seconds of Grandma’s banana pudding or lied about brushing teeth. It would seem, however, that the chance to see her future husband is the one thing to give Caroline some gumption because before Annie can grab hold of Caroline’s arm or sweater or any part of her, Caroline has pressed her palms on top of the fence, jumped, plopped her hind end on the flat rocks, lifted her legs, and dropped down on the other side.

“Hurry up,” Caroline whispers, wrapping both hands around the lit end of the flashlight to douse it.

Taking one last look into the dark barn, Annie backs away from the open doorway, feeling certain she ought not turn her back on it, and follows Caroline over the fence.

As if walking through the snow that drifts up alongside the house every winter, Annie high-steps it through the weeds that have taken over on this side of the fence. Without her boys to help, Mrs. Baine has let the land go to seed. With both hands, Annie parts the tall, bristly stalks and takes one last look at the dark barn. The rustling she thinks she hears is only her imagination, or it’s likely the work of some critter caught in the barn’s upper rafters. The shifting shadows in the doorway are surely the work of thin clouds drifting across the dark sky and playing with the moonlight. At the sound of Caroline’s voice calling out for Annie to hurry up, Annie turns away from the barn and follows the yellow glow that bounces on ahead.

The well stands no more than twenty feet from the Baines’ house. If Annie had a stone in hand, she could throw it and have a good chance at hitting the front door. It hadn’t looked so close from the other side of the fence. Grandma would have called it wishful thinking, and she always says nothing causes a person more harm than wishful thinking. Standing on the near side of the well so she can keep an eye on the dark porch outside Mrs. Baine’s house, Annie pulls out her candle and her last two matches.

“Put that thing out,” she says to Caroline again, this time in a hiss. “You’re going to wake Mrs. Baine.”

Caroline slides around the well to Annie’s side and switches off the silver-handled flashlight just as Annie draws her match across the jagged rocks laid along the top of the well. The flame jumps, flickers, and dies out. She tosses the match aside, turns her back to shield the flame this time, and strikes her last one. The flame catches, steadies, and Annie touches it to her candle. Holding it such that the wax will drip into the well and not down her arm, she leans over the dark hole. The air is cooler here and smells of the shallow water along the river’s edge.

“You got no business here,” Annie says, lowering her candle into the well. The flame’s glow cuts a small hole in the darkness. “There ain’t nothing for you down there.”

Hooking one hand over the edge of the flat top, Annie leans into the hole and slowly, so the flame doesn’t get snuffed, lowers the candle. Through the thin cotton of her nightgown, the rock wall is cool and rough against her thighs. She hopes to see a handsome brown-haired boy, because brown-haired boys grow into brown-haired men and brown-haired men make the best husbands. And he’ll be tall. Surely he’ll be tall, taller than Annie. The yellow glow swells and glistens on the well’s smooth, dark insides.

“This’ll work better,” Caroline says, and like Annie, she tips over the well. She wraps both hands around the silver handle, points the flashlight in the black hole, and switches it back on. The light wobbles and bounces as she leans forward to rest on her forearms. Once she has settled on a comfortable position, her feet most certainly firmly on the ground, the light steadies.

“It’s midnight,” Caroline whispers. “Now, Annie. Now’s the time.”

Annie shakes her candle until its flame goes out, takes three deep breaths, and closes her eyes. When she opens them, she’ll see him, and she’ll know he’ll be her husband, and by summer’s end, she’ll kiss him full on the mouth. Their kiss won’t be sloppy like the ones the girls at school warn of, but this future husband will keep his tongue in his mouth, exactly where it belongs. Their kiss will be sweet, dry, pleasing, and Annie will be a new kind of girl after it’s over, and not a single kid at school will have one thing to say to Annie Holleran about husbands-to-be or first kisses.

“I see him,” Caroline says.

It’s little more than a whisper.

Again.

“There. I see him, right there. Do you see?” And in an even quieter voice, Caroline says, “I see my husband.”

• • •

ANNIE CAN STRETCH no farther. The smell is stronger. It’s an earthy smell, like damp leaves rotted down to their stems and the fuzzy green moss that grows among the river rocks and the mud when it squishes up between her toes. But there’s something else too. Something faint. Something foul. Before Annie can push away from the well to pinch her nose, the smell is gone.

“That’s my husband you’re seeing,” Annie says.

“He’s right there. Plain as day. Don’t you see?”

Annie squints, puckers her mouth.

“It’s true, Annie,” Caroline says. “My goodness, it’s true. That’s my husband.”

Even though Annie can’t see her, she knows Caroline’s black eyelashes will be fluttering and her cheeks will be flushed with red and she’ll be smiling the slightest smile. It’s the same way she looks when she leans over a baby carriage and babbles on about the sweetness of babies. She is seeing her future, her entire perfect future, and Annie is seeing nothing.

“I see something too,” Annie says. “Yes, I see something. Right there. I see him. I see my husband too.”

But she sees no one, nothing. This is how it goes between Annie and Caroline. Caroline all the time getting the better of things. She isn’t prideful about it. She never brags. She doesn’t even seem to notice she always does best or looks best or is best. The not being prideful and the not bragging and the not even seeming to notice make it all the worse. And now Caroline has stolen Annie’s vision, and it’s likely she’s stolen Annie’s husband.

“I see dark hair,” Annie says, her lies spreading out before her. “Brown. He has brown hair. That’s my husband. He’s tall and slender. The one with brown hair. He’s mine.”

As she tells her lies, Annie pushes away from the well, her stomach already queasy. Caroline stands too, holding the light so it catches her under the chin like it did in the bedroom. Her eyes sink into their sockets, her nostrils flare, and her cheekbones protrude.

“I saw him,” Caroline says.

In the slow way a person does when just waking up, Caroline opens and closes her eyes. She exhales one loud, long breath, and lets her arms drop to her sides. The flashlight dangles from one hand and throws a circle of light at her feet.

“The most handsome man ever,” she says. “The man I’m going to marry.”

She pauses, her eyes closed. She’s savoring Annie’s vision. Right this minute, she’s falling in love with Annie’s husband. Not only is Caroline stealing Annie’s first kiss, she’s stealing Annie’s future too.

“Now we have to find him,” Caroline says.

“That’s a damn fool thing to say,” Annie says, staring at the yellow patch of ground near Caroline’s feet. “Everyone knows you’re going to marry Olsen Weber. Was it Olsen Weber you saw down there?”

“No, it was not,” Caroline says, twisting her face as if she’s smelling the same foul smell as Annie, though it’s probably the thought of Olsen Weber causing that face. He’s one of many boys Caroline fancied for a short time before deciding he didn’t quite fit.

“The man I saw was striking, powerful,” Caroline says. “Successful, and rich too.”

“How can you figure all that from the looks of him?”

There’s something on the ground at Caroline’s feet, a twig maybe, a fallen branch, definitely something Caroline would trip over if Annie were to startle her and cause her to take a backward step or two.

“I know because I know,” Caroline says. “He had dark hair and blue eyes.”

“You’re lying.”

It might not be proof positive Caroline’s lying, but every dark-haired man Annie has ever seen has had dark eyes.

It’s times such as this when Annie wishes she’d be altogether good or altogether bad, because living somewhere in between is like having those cicadas buzzing in her ears. Rolling her hands into fists, she takes a step toward Caroline. And as Annie thought she would, Caroline takes a step away. That something on the ground creeps into the light.

“I’m not lying. Clear as day. I saw him clear as day.”

“Then it’s my husband you were seeing,” Annie says. “My husband down there.”

Annie slides one foot forward and then the other.

“It’s my day and my husband.”

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